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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a developmental writing course at Purdue University. The author argues that the basics of such a course as far as the student is concerned are motivation and a desire to learn writing, communication, careful diagnosis, organized plan for student mastery, provision for transferral, and reward. Helping students develop a desire to write depends on such factors as a congenial atmosphere, fostering the teacher's belief in the student's ability to think and to write, and providing an outlet for students' writing such as a school newspaper. The process necessary for publication is revieved and the role of the writing laboratory is discussed. Also examined are such topics as faculty education, the testing program, administration mechanics, and student evaluation. (TS)

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WHAT'S REALLY BASIC ABOUT THE BASIC WRITING COURSE?

LaVerne Gonzalez

When we, college professors, allow ourselves to be pressured into discussing, "What's really basic about . . . ," are we implying that what has been done is not truly basic, that only by blowing away all chaff can we find the nutritious kernel? Or are we suggesting that by finding the "basics" we will then miraculously become alchemists turning lead into pure gold? Is it not true that in searching so diligently for "basics" we are in serious danger of precipitating an epidemic of "overkill"? Surely overemphasis should be feared as greatly as underemphasis. Perhaps, however, we may speak of "basics" as fundamental considerations and in so doing analyze those necessary components of the initial writing experience implying a dualistic approach; i.e. composition course plus writing lab.

dualistic approach

Thinking then in terms of the writing lab as an extension of or appendage to the basic writing course demands that we return to a holistic view of the writing process. We realize now that grammar, rhetoric, writing are not really disparate entities, that in fact they should never have been taught in isolation since they do not exist in isolation. Consequently a plan must be developed that integrates the parts. Purdue has employed a plan that insures the interfunctioning of writing course and writing lab. A developmental writing course, English 100, initiates the students into the whole program. We have known and have seen reaffirmed semester after semester that a student only learns what he wants to learn. Therefore the basic writing course must either create or uncover the desire to learn writing, not reading, not linguistics, not grammar (as essential as these three are), but the desire to write--to communicate ideas meaningfully for both writer and reader. We must be equipped to cultivate in the stu-

importance of desire

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dents a desire so pressing they demand the knowledge we are prepared to supply. I feel a need to underline this point.

We have found that several factors coalesce to foster this desire: 1) the teacher's constant and unfeigned respect and acceptance of the student as a person--in other words acknowledgment of his personhood, 2) the teacher's belief in the student's ability to think and to write, 3) the student's need to make an idea "perfectly clear," and 4) the appreciation of the peer group. Our own experience will serve here as an example for you--not as a "must follow" route but as a possible route.

components of desire

At the outset English 100 seeks to develop each of the components of the "desire to write." All teachers including writing laboratory teachers must participate in the three day workshop orientation program geared to changing teachers' negative attitudes as well as to developing techniques for transmitting this attitude of respect and acceptance. Suggested background reading for each teacher is: 1) Glasser's Reality Therapy, Harris' I'm O.K., You're O.K., Highet's The Art of Teaching, and Macrorie's Uptaught. Whatever role the teacher finally is to play in the learning process, that of director or facilitator, the supportive attitude is basic. Thus the atmosphere into which the student steps will be one that is conducive to learning; that is to say one that is not hostile. We have found in our work that no particular dialect nor economic background need necessarily limit a student; yet we know that barriers to learning have existed or the student would not be at this place at this point in time. Therefore we conclude that environment in its broadest sense must be a contributing factor. Our position of teacher becomes that of the vanguard.

congenial atmosphere

The environment created in the classroom through the teacher's

attitude and employment of disarming techniques is reinforced in the writing lab where all the instructors are not only aware of the English 100 strategies but have also taught English 100. In addition the physical environment itself of the lab is planned to become an expression of the acceptance of the teachers and to provide stimuli for thinking. Plants, posters, pictures, books invite the student. Thus a dove-tailing of the two, classroom and laboratory, create a supportive milieu. As educators we cannot afford to overlook, ignore, or demean this initial and subtle encounter. Call it mood creating if you will, this remains a strong contributing factor to final success--success being student involvement. Any housewife, secretary, teacher of business letter writing, merchant, advertiser or psychologist will attest to the necessity of this preparation.

Belief in ability

The second component in fostering the desire to write, the teacher's belief in the students' ability to think and to write, may be seen as an extension of the teacher's respect for and acceptance of the student. Perhaps you have heard of the principal in Ohio who desperately sought a teacher for a class of sixth graders, notorious for their rowdiness, stupidity, and inability. In fact they were known as the worst class in the school. No one wanted to tackle teaching the group; finally he hired a teacher from another district to take the class for a semester. The class became a paragon of virtue, took all of the awards in scholastics, and generally amazed the school. At the end of the term, the bewildered and delighted principal, having congratulated the teacher on her unprecedented success, asked her secret. "Secret? It's no secret. Who wouldn't succeed with students having those IQ's listed on that sheet you handed me at the beginning of the semester?"

"Those weren't IQ scores; those were locker numbers". These may or may not be a true story; the fact remains that time after time we

have observed the validity of the self-fulling prophecy.

Still in many circles cynicism flourishes; students' papers take the brunt of jokes repeated in the lounge or at cocktail parties; professors speak patronizingly of the "mindless students." Yet an even more deplorable situation exists: ridicule has been praised as an acceptable and effective teaching device. The Zen master may well strike the disciple who fails to grasp the meaning of a question. Such behavior works well with a disciple; i.e., one who already possesses a burning desire to know. Most college freshmen I know about have not yet achieved that "burning desire" to write, at least not expository prose in the basic composition course. We must rely, then, upon the teacher's belief in the student's ability to act as a catalyst, precipitating the desire. For example English 100 begins immediately, the first day, with writing; immediately the teacher reponds to the writing, finding strengths in thought and/or the teacher's presentation. Often/questioning or suggesting materials for further investigation enables the student to know more on the subject and thus to have more to write. Since a real skill here is to ask significant or right questions, we spend time in the workshop looking at student papers and discussing how to question.

To further encourage and develop the beginning writer at Purdue, we publish a weekly newspaper, Easy Writers. The paper serves as an incentive and reward, an outlet for students' ideas and simultaneously provides a teaching tool for the teacher both in the classroom and in the laboratory. Articles published in the paper are used as stimulus for discussion on a particular subject as well as examples to be criticized for techniques of presentation and errors of usage. Every member of the writing lab will have read the newspaper and will make it a

motivational tools

point to mention ideas, often continuing discussions begun in the classroom. We give the newspaper as wide a circulation outside of the classroom as possible so that students will find a real necessity to write well. To provide additional incentive for publishing, we offer literary awards to those students who have published the best articles during the semester. Students send particularly fine papers to the school newspaper, hometown papers and journals in their disciplines. Simplifying the total concept, we may say the publication functions as a motivator. Peer criticism, too, begins with the publication. There is a special section in the newspaper for criticism, peer groups for criticism are formed in the classes, criteria for criticizing and evaluating writing are developed and used. Finally we publish a booklet Since You Asked Me... each year of the best articles which appears in Easy Writers. What we have done with the newspaper is to fan a vague interest into a firm determination to communicate by: 1) convincing the student he has something to say, 2) providing him an outlet for his work, and 3) encouraging criticism. For some students the desire to write comes early in the semester, almost as soon as they see the newspaper; for others it comes later. At whatever moment it comes, the teacher is prepared.

Newspaper as Motivator

A system or heuristic, if you will, has been established for publishing in the newspaper. The heuristics I am suggesting here is not so prescriptive as that described for example in Kenneth Burke's Dramatic Pentad in which he offers:

heuristics

Act (What was done?)

Scene (When or where was it done?)

Agent (who did it?)

Agency (How was it done?)

Purpose (Why was it done?)

Actually our plan is more of a methodology basic to any writing situation. Burke's neat and well-conceived heuristics could be one of the subheadings under our plan - perhaps at the rough draft stage. At any rate with the development of the following experience, the newspaper, rather than the teacher, becomes the facilitator.

Let us review the process necessary for publication. Observations on various subjects are made and recorded in the writer's notebook; ideally bits of dialog, descriptions, impressions will be recorded. The teacher looks through the notebook making suggestions for types of articles and methods of developing them which are suggested by what the writer has recorded.

How to Publish

The student will then do a rough draft which he will read to the class or to a peer group; suggestions for improvement will be made. The student, then, takes the rough draft and develops it to hand in. The teacher will read the revised copy, noting all problem areas and asking for revision. Again the student works but this time he will work in the writing lab after the student and teacher have discussed the problems and have decided on a hierarchy for working with these. A basic involved here is that the student decides which problem is to be tackled first and <u>how</u>. I do not mean to infer that ours is the <u>only</u> method. A history student involved in his major could find the same degree of motivation.

Aimed then with desire (the need to communicate having been discovered and encouraged) and the plan for attacking the problems which have not been cleared away in their own attempts at revision, the students go to the writing laboratory. They go voluntarily (any student may choose to work on his list of skills to be mastered alone) and they receive no credit for laboratory work. In other words the incentive established in the classroom must be so strong that it carries them

across the channel of dread to the new experience--writing laboratory.

Here the student finds the same supportive atmosphere that prevailed in the classroom plus the physical properties conducive to thinking (since the laboratory is a fixed location not used for any other class the plants, pictures, etc. previously mentioned are used). In addition at least two liaison members from the writing laboratory meet with the English 100 teachers in their weekly staff meetings; therefore the lab instructors know about problems and solutions. Communication is immediately established with the English 100 teacher since a note indicating that the student has checked in at the lab with whom the student will be working and on what. The basic I see here is the close communication between the two people involved in the student's mastery at this point. Papers are <u>not</u> revised in the writing laboratory, nor is editing done. These two activities remain solely the responsibility of the student as he becomes a craftsman in his area. The laboratory functions primarily in a supportive capacity.

communication essential

A separate file is maintained for each student working in the writing laboratory and the English 100 teachers check these files periodically to ascertain the students' progress. Moreover the course teacher will check subsequent writing to determine mastery in those areas in which the student has been working thereby reinforcing the need for transference of a given skill from an exercise into writing habit.

A basic for the writing lab instructor must, of course, be diagnosis so far as priority of skills is involved; often discussion will reveal this. For example it is quite useless to work on noun/verb agreement if the student doesn't recognize either of these or if he does not understand the English logic which requires a particular agreement - plural with plural. Likewise it is senseless to speak of fused sentences

careful diagnosis

if the student has no concept of "sentencehood." Frankly I do not know of a test that can accurately reveal these deeper needs. When the student arrives with a now full-fledged determination plus a list of specific needs, the task for the laboratory instructor becomes after diagnosis, methodology, the "how". The laboratory itself is equipped with various methods for teaching grammar skills and encouraging mastery.

In the midst of a plethora of possibilities--exercises, programmed material, tapes--the problem becomes which will work with this specific student. Therefore at the initial encounter time will spent in establishing rapport, but the student will also be asked to write. In other words the laboratory instructor will employ the basic tactics of the English 100 teacher; involve the student, the only difference being that now the student demands to be taught; he is motivated to learn. Again the writing will be looked at and discussed by the two who will then decide on a plan of attack. Very often the student will try drills first. If this plan is successful--successful meaning the student demonstrates an ability to transfer a skill learned through practice drills into the actual writing--another note is sent to the teacher indicating this progress. If drills have not worked, tapes may be used or . . . . What we are seeing here is a very close triangular communication system as well as a firm cooperative plan, involving student, English 100 teacher, and laboratory instructor. Of course, the major problem remains that of transferral as the student attempts consciously to incorporate what has been learned in the writing lab into the classroom situation. Proofreading becomes very important at this juncture and the writing laboratory instructor will continue to furnish material for proofreading as well as on the spot writing until con-

The necessary triangle

definite plan for teaching problems

vinced that transferral has occurred. When one skill has been mastered, the student will tackle the next until all areas have been conquered. At present we are exploring the idea of asking students to pass an exit exam before being dismissed from the laboratory, but we have not as yet finalized this plan.

What we have been considering thus far are some basics or prerequisites for the basic writing course. Some major concerns have been 1) creating desire, 2) communication between individual involved in the process, 3) providing supportive environment. When we look at such contributing factors we might well return again to the classroom where the course does in fact evolve from the students' writing, making that writing the content of the course. That is not to say that students do not go outside of the classroom experience; they do, but only as their own writing indicates the interest. Simultaneously as the student is practicing in the writing laboratory, his writing in the classroom continues where he writes, rewrites, and edits for formal publication in Easy Writers; each student will publish at least once. Students having successfully published in Easy Writers are asked to rework their material, this time for a wider audience and submit the article for the university newspaper.

While students are occupied with the writing, editing, and publishing, English 100 staff and laboratory staff are concerned with political matters. Faculty education at the departmental and university level is a must. To help meet this need, as we have already noted, English 100

political matters

publishes a yearly booklet, Since You Asked Me. . .which features the best articles published in Easy Writers that year. But the whole movement is much more complex requiring a re-educational program and orientation. To this end we encourage the faculty and administration to make class visitation as well as staff meeting visitations. Minutes

of all meetings are distributed to faculty members, faculty are invited to participate in special situations for example one teacher asked various members to meet with peer groups to criticize papers, and student evaluation (unerringly high) are published. All persons involved in the program do evaluations which we publish.

If we move from the political problems, professors who simply do not want such students at the university, to the laboratory administrative problems, we will find several needs. One must be an adequate and thoroughly constructed testing program. Such a demand can be placed second only to the importance of proper diagnosis. Not only do students feel happier about seeing tests that prove their ability but administrators demand such evidence of the desireability of the basic writing course and writing lab.

reward

Purely administrative problems such as whether or not to use students as tutors, how to maintain the files, how to get the money for the program, I will only touch lightly here. The limited amount of money available alters many plans. At our institution for example the laboratory has been available only to students enrolled in a Composition Course. Schedule sheets listing hours during which the laboratory will be opened are circulated to all teachers of composition. Students sign up for appointments. We have offered "mini-course" for ten to twelve students or five - ten or whatever number all wanting to work on the same problem. Frankly we have not done too much so far as clearing assignments, feeling rather that activity belongs to teacher and stu-

administration mechanics

dent rapport. We are not helping students to please a given professor's assignment, rather to mastery writing skills. In special cases, however, lab instructors will help to clarify assignments. Students are asked to evaluate every meeting with a checklist; teachers are asked to evaluate students' classroom performance following the laboratory experience, again the checklist. Although not a perfect indicator the checklist does have the virtue of eliciting response with a minimum outlay of time and effort. As soon as the student leaves, the laboratory instructor indicates in the students' file exactly what was done and the amount of progress made. Students meet with the same instructor each time unless a personality clash has occurred or if the laboratory instructor of student feels insufficient progress is being made. The problem of how to keep the student coming is not a problem if the composition teacher utilizes the laboratory files and communicates often with the instructor. We of course, use peer groups for classroom criticism; however, to use students in the laboratory would be helpful only if the student had been carefully trained and again some freshmen resent upper classmen even if the latter are quite competent. Students with the most severe problems should be seen only by the most competent laboratory instructor. A very thorough report written by the laboratory director listing carefully all of the activities of the laboratory - students seen with what results plus number of students turned away because of inadequate staffing or not helped because of insufficient equipment sent to the department head as well as the dean has been our most effective means of enlarging staff and acquiring equipment.

constant evaluation

Finally those basics of the basic writing course I would see so far as the student is concerned would be 1) motivation of a desire 2) communication (more than one authority figure involved 3) careful diagnosis

4) organized plan for student mastery 5) provision for transferral and 6) reward. In addition, of course, the other basics involve the sheer mechanics of faculty reeducation and basic course administration.